



Office of the President

“Educating During a Recovery,” Address to Faculty, September 2021

September 1, 2021

I have been thinking a lot about what to say in this dumpster fire of a world that we are living in in September 2021. Why continue an education, particularly in a Middlebury incarnation? It’s a legitimate question, and one I believe always should be asked. Why educate when climate change is now creating more human cross-border movement, and threatening more wilderness, every day? When COVID does not stop, and there seems to be no true relief? When wars and the rumors of wars are destroying millions of lives and livelihoods? When wealth inequality and racism persist, and rather than being solved, become weaponized in endless polarizing debate? When fires and hurricanes devastate our landscapes? Today, in addition to all the Middlebury updates after the summer, I want to think with you briefly at the beginning of this year, a time of global urgency, about that question. Why educate?

I wanted, very much, for an answer to that question to be about educating during a recovery. Of a certain kind of resilience after COVID that includes lessons learned as we move forward. But alas, in the face of Delta, it can’t be about a rearview mirror. It has to be about living safely with COVID. About evolving to live in that reality. And my response to the question about the reason for a liberal arts and science education is related: In the face of this moment, these moments, we educate to meet the challenge of evolving as a community. Our classrooms, as our primary communities, challenge us to become something more than rule-governed places with set learning goals (although they should certainly start with that). Rather, as educators we are challenged to create dynamic evolving ecosystems, and the first mini-communities that students will know. And in addition to evolving community, there is a related answer to why educate in the

liberal arts and sciences: we educate to instill courage. Our themes for this year, then, are learning how to evolve as a community, particularly in the classroom. And finding the *courage* to do it in the midst of disagreement, finding the will toward a common educational purpose.

We're starting that project this year with the largest application pool, and the largest class, ever. This is unusual, and due to the fact that we made a decision not to deny access to anyone who wanted to return to Midd—from remote learning, from a year away. Like most other elite colleges, we had to get creative in making room on our campus, making room in our classrooms, to ensure a Middlebury education. Our team worked hard throughout the summer to make sure we offered enough classes to maintain educational access, and to provide faculty and staff resources for our students to learn. First and foremost, I want to thank you for your willingness to step up in this context, and our academic and student life teams will continue to support you in as many ways as we possibly can.

We also had to pivot in the context of Delta variant. We are making decisions in the following, complex context: A highly vaccinated community in the country, the constant flow in and out of our campus, and a highly fluid status of the virus itself. As many of you heard on Tuesday, I asked the team, as we did last year, to create thorough testing plans in accordance with state and local guidelines and grounded in the current science. Their protocols do exactly that, whether it is testing, quarantine and isolation, or masking. We will continue to monitor daily all of the many conditions that we monitored last year; we will continue to learn from the latest data available on breakthrough cases; we will pivot immediately, and have plans to do so. I'm proud of the extraordinary thing we accomplished last year, and this year we will continue with the vigilance, care, communication, and guidance that helped us be successful last year.

We closed this past year with a higher-than-hoped-for but still far-lower-than-projected deficit of around \$12 million. We begin this year with a projected small surplus, a budget created in the midst of COVID in conversation with several faculty, staff, and student bodies. This year will be the first budget that we have created through the new budget process. We will continue that process of biweekly consultation with the faculty resources committee, open meetings to talk about priorities; David Provost and Jeff Cason are committed to this model. And, we will continue to work with the faculty resources committee on models for spending. We will also deepen our commitment to salaries and allocating resources to our people. Our healthy endowment growth of

this past year will contribute to that work. Our new VP for HR, Caitlin Goss, is excited to continue the work we began on salaries, employee recognition, and many other important projects.

Our fundraising, in terms of actually bringing in the cash we need, was lower than we'd hoped. We believe that is due to the instability that COVID continued to reap, as well as some of the larger gifts being held for the campaign. The good news is that we started the leadership, or silent, phase of the campaign this past July, and are in quite a good place for building the 40–50 percent of the corpus that we need in order to start the public phase. We are in some very fruitful conversations.

I also want to take the time to remind you of our priorities for the campaign: access, academic excellence, and the student experience. Access is the number one bucket, the highest bucket. It involves financial aid, particularly endowed financial aid, as that is budget relieving as well as focused on the demographics of the future—where talent is abundant but opportunity might not be—and must be expanded. It also involves allowing student access to all of Middlebury—making sure the Seizing the Opportunities Fund is always available, that financial aid to other parts of Middlebury, such as the Language Schools, the Schools Abroad, Bread Loaf, and Monterey, is clear and accessible. All students should have access to all parts of the Middlebury experience.

Our second area—that of academic excellence—focuses on funding both traditional professorships as well as faculty-led initiatives across the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and arts, where we feel that Middlebury can uniquely lead. You've heard us speak about all of them, in some way or another—data literacy, in the form of MiddData, which was the topic of a Clifford Symposium last year and continues to invigorate so many small and large projects. Environmental literacy, in the form of the collaboration between our academic departments and the Environmental Council's work on justice, the sustainability solutions lab, and Energy2028. Many departments and programs have been engaged here. The third: conflict transformation literacy—the ability to work across difference that was the cornerstone of the faculty-led Engaged Listening Project and has now developed into a faculty and staff conversation, and possible institutional grant, in conflict transformation that could also involve faculty teaching and research across all of Middlebury. The fourth: cross-cultural literacy, particularly in the area of Black Studies, where we have already raised funds for two professorships and hope to focus on more across the curriculum. These are all supportive and expansive of what we are already doing at

Middlebury, something which builds on that which is already growing—indeed, grown by all of you.

The third area for the campaign focuses on the student experience. This includes building for a new student center—what one student called “a living room for the entire campus,” where the open architecture allows students to connect and dwell in a single public space, even as they are part of their own smaller living spaces, social groups, and identities. But this bucket also focuses on summer experiences, internships, our career center, our centers for creativity and innovation, and our new life-skills residential education program, headed by faculty member Rob Moeller, now called COMPASS. This campaign also involves fundraising for a new first-year dormitory, which is essential to replace Battell, and possibly a new museum, where there are major challenges in the current architectural design and our capacity to protect and display our growing collection.

Last year we were able to move forward with an anti-racist task force, which focuses on building community, the creation of PRISM, an LGBTQIA+ center, who will be housed later this semester at 23 Adirondack View, the hiring of a new director for AFC and a new student educator on equity and inclusion. We are thrilled to welcome them and I hope that you will be able to reach out to them soon. Our workshops on equity and inclusion in the classroom will continue, as will the grants from the CDEI fund. We are particularly excited to welcome the work of Tara Affolter, our director of equity and inclusion initiatives, and Christal Brown, who will be not only leading the task force on anti-racism but, as the Twilight Artist in Residence, integrating the work of anti-racism into the arts in new and exciting ways. Stay tuned for more from both of those colleagues working in new capacities.

I want to turn now to the theme that I see most deeply in our transition into this academic year: evolving community. The first and most important “evolving community” is the classroom. It dovetails nicely with the theme of our Teaching and Writing Retreat, which CTLR held on August 26 and 27 on campus with over 40 enthusiastic participants—“Making Connections.” CTLR hopes to develop that theme this year, beginning with their session earlier this month on curricular resources at the Axinn Center. As the Axinn Center event showed, our teaching can be supported by a host of offices and programs (from Beyond the Page to the museum to CCE to MiddData to Oratory Now to the Humanities Labs to Quantitative Skills Pedagogy, and much more). CTLR also partnered with the Engaged Listening Project to host a two-day workshop on Sept. 2 and 3 with essential partners in this work. We had 18 faculty and staff participate, and we plan to have that

group engage in other programming this fall on dialogic tools for teaching and working with students. From our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion faculty and staff, Roberto Lint Sagarena and Renee Wells both contributed to new faculty orientation, and CTLR plan to work closely with both of them as well as Tara Affolter. All of these workshops and programs are about that evolving classroom I mentioned earlier, and I hope all of us will take advantage of these opportunities to learn about our students and remember what we don't know, as well as what we do, about our classrooms.

Evolving community also involves our environmental goals, and how we change to incorporate our teaching to address climate change. Here, our environmental work includes advancing Energy2028's goals and using it as a resource for teaching and research, student theses, in all of our classrooms. We are also thinking about building resilience (physical, civic, and psychological) to address climate change. And Environmental Council is also working on integrating our DEI initiatives and curricula with our sustainability and environmental initiatives and curricula. I have also asked those working in these areas to imagine what the world, and our community, needs from Midd to foster a more sustainable future and start some conversations about that. We are already thinking about how our community will evolve after Energy2028.

Most importantly, evolving community involves rethinking who our students are, and what they bring to the classroom. Each year we have reached a new all-time high when it comes to the numbers of first-generation and students of color joining us—this year being no exception. The jump is to 18 percent first gen, and 37 percent students of color, and 13 percent international students. And we all know that naming numbers is an empty exercise if we cannot support our students when they are here. They come after COVID 1, and in the midst of COVID 2.0. Many of them have not experienced the give-and-take of an in-person classroom. Some of them do not know the rules of engagement with professors, except online. Many of them are rusty in their critical thinking skills—the very things they wanted to come to Midd to develop. Many of them are anxious about their social skills—an integral part of the college experience, yes, but not their college experience yet. Some of them have been our students for a year and are only now setting foot on our campus.

Many of them, like you, are still processing the losses in their families from last year: loss of a loved one, of a job, of a dream. Even more than previously, and that rate was already high, they are struggling with anxiety and depression. There are a myriad of ways, stated and unstated, that

the students coming to us now are different than they were before. It is our job to listen, to pause, to take the time to understand what experiences they are bringing with them. Our classrooms are their first communities since COVID, and they must evolve to meet their needs.

We, too, are evolving as a community. Our governance processes are more robust than ever before. We now have ongoing conversations with trustees. We have a trustee DEI committee that has been inspired by the CDEI faculty committee—which itself is more active than ever before. Our uses of technology in the classroom have permanently changed—in both small and large ways. We have seen how online learning can be a supplement to our unchanged core commitment of transformational in-person learning. We have seen how students' awareness of place, and of their larger communities, can fuel their learning. This year, as we evolve from the pandemic, we will see what becomes endemic to our own particular ecosystem of education.

I want to turn now to the second answer to the question, Why educate in the liberal arts and sciences? The work of evolving community takes courage, because we will not agree on things, and we live in a small community where we see each other all the time, every day, both on and off campus. That fact of educational intimacy, combined with the world of social media, where opinion usually outruns fact, creates intense pressures on all of us. Living and thriving in a small educational community demands graciousness and generosity even more than before. We should ask that of each other as we continue to deliberate on the things that inspire us, and the things that break our hearts.

Asking that of each other means having the courage to stay committed to the people with whom we disagree about deep things that matter to us—like future directions of a department, the nature of a hire, the validity of a course. That kind of courage is local courage. And it is all the more necessary for us because we are living so close together.

But in the midst of all these moments which necessitate local courage, there is something else we have done, and that is instill courage in our students. Around the world. Some of you may know that much of our August was spent working with two extraordinary Afghani Middlebury alumni, and helping them as they made their dangerous journey out of Kabul into exile—with only a few days' notice and, in some cases, an afternoon's notice. Shabana Bisaj-Rasikh, founder of SOLA, the first boarding school for girls in Afghanistan, brought 140 women—faculty, staff, and students—to the airport and to Doha. From Doha she brought them to Kigali, where they are now pursuing

study abroad as an entire school. As she had stated in her writings during and since her escape, the uninterrupted education of women is one of the most important forms of resistance that can occur right now.

Her fellow Middlebury alum Bilal Sarwary also made a harrowing escape from Kabul to Doha to Canada, where he arrived last week and is still in quarantine. Bilal is an Afghani citizen, a freelance, high-profile, pro-democracy journalist who also ran for a seat in the now defunct Afghan parliament in a conservative, Al-Qaeda-dominated province. As an Afghan, he was low on the American list of potential evacuees. As a freelance journalist, he was not an official employee of any media company, and therefore low on all of their lists, too. And yet he was higher profile than many on those lists, having collaborated with many pro-democracy activists and written for and given interviews for CNN, NPR, ABC, BBC, Al-Jazeera. Bilal had no country. He had no company. He had Middlebury.

There are many other Afghani alums that we are in touch with, all of them doing brave and important work. It is worth noting in these two examples that both of these young people—one creating the first girls' school in all Afghanistan, and the other relentlessly exercising his right to free expression on behalf of a democratic, equitable, and just Afghanistan—showed extraordinary courage in the last 10 years as they tried to build their country. Because of that courage, both of them were targets for the Taliban.

It is also worth noting that both of them credit their Middlebury education as one of the things that inspired them to do what they did. Middlebury gave them the relationships to keep them going. It gave them the long view of history, and of politics, and of religion. It gave them the critical thinking skills to question, to probe, and to build. It gave them a sense of justice, and fair process, and the need for access to knowledge for all—whether through education or media. The relationships they built and ideas they encountered here were models for them as they moved out into the world—a world far more dangerous than the one we occupy in Middlebury, Vermont.

You, the faculty, gave them that courage. And you may not have even known you were doing it. You literally gave them heart. And you will do it again, this year, for thousands more students. I sent Bilal a picture of Middlebury every day he was trying to flee from danger. He wrote back:

Middlebury is my second home. Middlebury's training helped me make a name for myself in the world. I am overwhelmed by its kindness and I am trying to reach my mother of knowledge and her city as soon as possible.

This is the essence of a 21st-century education, and what we must do as we evolve as a community: to encourage, to give heart. Thank you.

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Office Hours - Spring 2023
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Wednesday, April 26 from 2:00-3:30 p.m.
Monday, May 15 from 4:00-5:30 p.m.